

Greer Citizen
Greer, SC
Circ. 9887
From Page:
10
5/23/2007
61135



135

Local charities managing to survive without state aid

Many depend on donations

BY JOHN MURRAY

Editor's Note: John Murray is a resident of Greer and a student at the University of South Carolina School of Journalism working on an independent study

An independent streak among Greer-area agencies providing mobile meals to senior citizens keeps some from sharing almost \$3 million in state aid for the elderly.

They are program operators like Jane McQueen, executive director of Mobile Meals of Spartanburg, which serves about 2,000 meals a day. "We've never gotten state or federal money," she said, "I started this as a Christian ministry, and I want it to remain autonomous."

The state Legislature added \$2.9 million to this year's Office on Aging budget to help support in-home and group meal programs for poor and disabled seniors along with other programs. But most of the Upstate's "mobile meal" programs are independently funded by private organizations such as churches or charity groups.

McQueen she said does not think the present Republican state administration would tell her how to run her organization, but by not accepting federal funding, Mobile Meals can continue serving the community the way it wants.

Nancy Ogle, executive director of Senior Centers of Spartanburg County, said that "maybe the Upstate is more socially conscious than other areas of the state" in being willing to support such agencies through private donations. Her agency accepts state money through the Appala-

chian Area Agency on Aging at the S.C. Appalachian Council of Governments.

Michael Stogner, director of the agency on aging, said others in the Upstate getting state money are Senior Action in Greenville and Senior Solutions in Pickens, Oconee, and Anderson counties. Forty-six groups across South Carolina

are receiving the state money.

Mobile meal programs, state or privately funded, are needed throughout the Upstate, Ogle said. For instance, she said, many seniors in Victor Mill and Greer Mill have been "woefully in need" since those mills shut down.

Woodruff, Enoree and Cross Anchor also have dire needs, she said.

Of the more than 4.2 million people in South Carolina, more than 500,000 are 65 or older, according to the U.S. Census. Of those, more than 58,000, or 11.6 percent, live below the poverty line or are disabled.

About a third of those receive mobile meals or other community services - the lowest proportion in the Southeast - and there is a 4,000-person waiting list, according to AARP, the former American Association of Retired Persons.

Stogner said private organizations can be just as effective as state-funded ones in providing meals.

"I think there are more non-profit and private agencies in the Upstate than across the state because they found a way to get community support for their programs instead of relying on the state," he said.

Government-funded agencies not only distribute meals, but also must offer financial planning, health programs and lifestyle education programs, Stogner said. They also must meet federal dietary regulations; and although some pri-

vate agencies do all of that and more, they are not required to, he said.

State Sen. Thomas Alexan-

der, R-Oconee, has been a prominent proponent of meal programs for seniors.

"This provides personal contact, which means just as much as the nutritional value of the food," he said.

Alexander said it does not matter so much to him whether an agency receives state money, but he wants to ensure that every agency that wants the support can get it.

In a state where seniors make up 12.3 percent of the population, slightly above the nation's average of 12.1 percent, the importance of funding meals to help them stay in their own homes longer is increasingly being realized.

"It is cheaper to send your child four years to a four-year university than to send an elderly person to a nursing home for one year," said Frank Adams, spokesman for the state Office on Aging.

AARP says it costs taxpayers \$822 per person a year for services that keep seniors active and out of nursing homes. By contrast, the group says a Medicaid-paid nursing home bed costs taxpayers \$25,000 to \$37,000 a year. AARP estimates that meal programs could save the state \$30 million over the next three years.

AARP is now asking legislators to allocate \$2.9 million annually to senior meal programs instead of the one time supplemental appropriation the state provided this year.